

Mysticism and Mythology: Embracing the Asian Malay Tradition

by

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Statement of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institutions. To the best of my knowledge and belief, it incorporates no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made.

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Abstract

The search for one's identity cannot be reduced to the glorification of the ancestral past. It must look towards the future and have due regard to the sense of history.

Zainol Shariff (1994)

This project engages social and cultural discourses of Malay art, as part of identity-making and personal reflection, as I embrace this rich tradition in life and in making art. I have formulated contextual frameworks from significant contemporary aesthetic concepts and theories, as I search for self, truth and beauty in the sublime phenomena of art.

This exegesis examines the distinctive traditional creative traits and art sources of the Malay people while reflecting on the current influences and challenges of twenty-first century art making. Claims of shifts in power in the international art market, from the West to the East, made by Fenema (1996), and the persistent thinness of critical thinking on art identified by Jit (1994), make this project significant to the development of the sociology of the art landscape for modern Malays.

I developed a collection of investigative visual art works, using the traditional batik medium, as a form of personal engagement, understanding and appreciation of this traditional Malay painting technique. This is drawn from visual discourses based on significant Asian historical and sociological data, relevant concepts, models and theories through biblical studies and an observational field trip to Yogyakarta and Surakarta, Indonesia. By cross-referencing concepts and theoretical analysis with a practical investigative process, I sharpened my critical observational and reasoning skills as an Asian research candidate and visual arts practitioner.

The writing and artwork presented in this project attempt to capture the contemporary practice of Malay visual arts that is shaped by a colossal struggle to balance tradition, innovation and continuity with the epistemology and ontology of art in the twenty-first century.